

Chapter 6

Sinking the Konigsberg

On the not-too-frequent occasions when I could take a day off and hand over the running of my squadron to my senior pilot, I used to relax as best I could; sometimes by strolling round Kirkwall or gently exploring the surrounding countryside, anything in fact that was peaceful and in no way connected with flying and the war. But not so my friend Bill Lucy. As far as I could make out he spent all his off-duty time in the operations room, studying the reports coming in and hoping always that he would find some new target that he and his squadron could attack.

On one of my off days, (9th April 1940 to be exact) an excited Bill Lucy shattered my peace with a most outrageous plan. He told me that in the operations room he had seen a Royal Air Force reconnaissance report that said a German cruiser was lying alongside in Bergen harbour and, if I agreed, he proposed taking both squadrons across and dive-bombing her.

Though not a fire-eater like Bill I was certainly prepared to take reasonable risks for myself and my squadron, and obviously such an attack could not possibly be expected by the enemy and would therefore have that greatest advantage of all —surprise. But was this a reasonable risk?

I pointed out to Bill that Bergen was about two hours flying each way in still air for Skuas and that our official endurance was only 4 hrs 20 mins; to which he replied that we both knew that we could stretch this a bit and that if we didn't hang around over the target too long we should be able to make it. My next observation was that there were long-range German fighters, Me 110s, at Stavanger and that we would be sitting targets for them. Not, Bill said, if we carry out a surprise attack, straight in and out; they will not have time to get up from Stavanger and intercept us. I then asked him how the hell we carried out a surprise attack on a target that lay 30 to 40 miles up the Bergen Fjord; to which he replied that we should take off at night at a time that would allow us to arrive over Bergen at sunrise. Non-fire-eater Partridge then played his trump card by saying that though such a raid might just be possible the station CO would never authorize such a risky undertaking; but Bill's reply was that he had already discussed it with the CO and that if I agreed we had authorization

to carry it out tomorrow. I must admit that on my own I don't think I would even have thought up this plan and all credit for its inception must go to Bill Lucy. His enthusiasm and confidence was however having an effect on me and I was beginning to think it might, with luck, be possible. After a little further discussion I agreed and we reported to the station CO who gave us the order to go ahead.

Bill and I didn't want to discuss our objective too widely for security reasons; the last thing we wanted was a reception committee waiting for us at Bergen. We decided that plans could be made just by ourselves and our two squadron observers, and the four of us retired to the operations room to work out how and what we were going to do. As I have said before my squadron observer was Robin Bostock, but Robin at this moment was on loan to Coastal Command, RAF. Many naval observers were on loan in this manner to the RAF, not because they were better navigators but because of their inbred skill at recognizing and identifying warships from the air. There was little chance of a RN officer who had lived with ships all his service life mistaking, say, a German pocket battleship for one of our City Class cruisers, and such instant and accurate identification could be vital. With Robin away I was given Lieutenant Commander Geoffrey Hare as my observer. He was senior to me and vastly experienced and I cannot speak too highly of the support he gave me or of the excellence of his navigation that brought me over the target at exactly the planned time.

Studying the maps and charts in the operations room we decided that there were few alternatives open to us and we settled on the following simple plan:

1. Briefing our aircrews to be at 0415.
2. Take off at 0500.
3. One 500 lb SAP (semi-armour-piercing) bomb, eight 20 lb bombs and full .303 ammunition to be carried by each aircraft.
4. Nine aircraft from 803 and seven from 800 to take part. (This was dictated by the availability of aircraft and aircrew).
5. Course to and from the target to be given to each pilot. (This was because observers were only carried in the squadron CO's aircraft. The backseat crew in the other aircraft were not trained in navigation but were telegraphist air gunners, trained in W/T communications and gunnery). Thus, if any

- aircraft got separated from the leader the pilot would at least have a course to steer.
6. Squadrons would form up over Hatston aerodrome and the crossing would be made at 10,000 feet in open formation.
 7. Rendezvous after the attack would be the small island with lighthouse off the entrance to Bergen Fjord at 5000 feet. Leaders would wait no longer than five minutes for stragglers.
 8. The course to be taken was the shortest one, direct from Hatston to Bergen. This course was dictated by the endurance of the Skua and pilots were warned not to do anything unnecessary that would waste fuel.

These were the outlines of the plan and detailed arrangements such as the order of take-off, order of attacking and queries from the aircrew would be explained at the briefing.

All that was left to do now was to warn the squadrons, aircrews and ground crews, that they were required for a fully armed operation taking off at 0500 and that the final aircrew briefing would be at 0415. Then it was just a question of waiting.

Waiting, as far as I was concerned, was the worst part of an operation of this sort. By 1515 in the afternoon I had visited the squadron, seen the armourers arming the aircraft, chatted to the other ground crews and to the aircrews, and there was nothing left for me but return to the hotel and try not to ponder too deeply on what lay ahead. I never found this an easy thing to do (I suppose everybody suffers from pre-operational nerves to a lesser or greater degree), and I always admired the bomber crews who carried out 30, 60 or more missions over Germany without cracking up. At least we were not called on to do this sort of thing with the regularity of those in Bomber Command.

I didn't have a very happy evening, making a poor effort at eating some tea and supper. I went to bed at 2100 and dozed fitfully until called with a cup of tea and sandwiches at 0330; and what a ghastly hour that is for a show of calmness, determination and leadership. However, as soon as I had something to do I felt better, and back at the airfield briefing my aircrews I didn't really have time for all those craven thoughts that plagued me at the hotel; just that nagging queasy feeling in the tummy remained, and an indecision as to whether one final visit to the loo would be advisable.

I watched my aircrews' faces when I told them what we were going to do. If their reactions were the same as mine originally were they didn't show it; they took it calmly and magnificently. There were a few questions and answers and then I warned the pilots to take extra care about the take-off and forming up in the dark. The Skua with full armament and fuel was not very nice or easy to fly; it tended to be unstable fore and aft and would remain so until some of the fuel had been used up. I can only liken it to driving a car which tends to wander and needs constant steering even on a straight road. The last thing we wanted was a prang or two before we had even started.

Just before 0500 there was the muffled report of a Coffman starter. One engine sprang into life, closely followed by another, and another until all other sounds were drowned by the shattering noise of 16 Bristol Perseus engines running up. No time for nerves now; pilots were too busy checking their instruments and watching for their turn to taxi out for take-off. At 0500 Bill Lucy roared down the runway and got airborne, to be followed at intervals by the rest of his squadron. Then it was my turn. Followed by my pilots we gingerly flew round above the airfield in the dark as we gradually joined up in formation at 3000 feet. Then Bill swung round on a course for Bergen, climbing slowly to reach 10,000 feet. We levelled out at that height and settled down to our most economical speed of 140 knots. It was important that leaders should keep a constant speed and that followers should not drop astern; excessive use of throttle to catch up or slow down meant more fuel used, and we didn't have any of that to spare!

I settled down 200 feet above and a few hundred yards out on Bill Lucy's starboard quarter. For some reason I always preferred flying on the right when in formation, I don't know why. It was a dark night but there were stars which helped, and I had no difficulty in keeping the other squadron in view, unless we ran into cloud. More time, of course, to think now and I felt sorry for the back seat crews who had even less to do than the pilots; at least we had our instruments to check, our formation to keep and could curse at the aircraft which refused to stay trimmed fore and aft.

My observer called me up on the intercom and told me that he reckoned we had just passed the halfway mark and were well set

to arrive on time. He also pointed out the wispy clouds that were beginning to form and said that he thought they might increase. I had already noticed them and told him that if I lost contact with the other squadron I would climb to 12,000 feet and he would have to navigate me to the target. He seemed very calm and happy about this.

The Bristol Perseus engine we were flying behind was the first of the sleeve-valve ones, and as such was as smooth as a sewing machine. Cruising along behind it had almost a soporific effect and, had the occasion not been so important, one's attention could easily have wandered after an hour or so at steady height and speed. The cloud was increasing: it was now almost three-tenths and occasionally I would lose sight of Bill Lucy's squadron. But on we went as smoothly as ever, both squadrons in fairly open formation. I was beginning to lose sight of them more often now and began to climb to 11,000 feet so that there would be a vertical separation between us. Suddenly I knew I had lost them and in the dark it was most unlikely I would pick them up again. I told Lieutenant Commander Hare, my observer, that I was out of contact with 803 Squadron, that I was climbing to 12,000 feet and would be carrying out an attack independent of the other squadron. This separation of the squadrons would mean that instead of the continuous surprise attack of 16 diving Skuas, one squadron or the other was probably going to attack after an interval, thus minimizing the effect of surprise and certainly alerting the defences. There was nothing to be done about it and we had discussed and recognized this possibility.

Faint signs of the approaching dawn were now showing and I could already make out details of my nearest aircraft. I looked at my watch; it was 0640 and we had already been airborne for 1 hr 40 mins. Ten minutes later my observer asked me to increase speed to 150 knots as he reckoned we had fallen a little behind schedule when climbing to 12,000 feet, and he also asked me to keep a lookout ahead for the Norwegian coastline. Fear, excitement, apprehension, anticipation, call it what you will, was beginning to rise now, with that familiar feeling in the pit of the stomach. Suddenly I saw it, the coast of Norway; Geoffrey Hare saw it too and said 'I think we are bang on, maintain this course and keep an eye open for our rendezvous island and lighthouse'. It was daylight now and shortly before 0655 we both spotted the island just off the Bergen Fjord fine on our port bow. I glanced around and below for the other squadron, hoping that I could

rejoin, but although the cloud had cleared away as we approached the coast there was no sign of them. The sun was just beginning to rise in a bright golden ball above the mountains which we knew cradled Bergen down to the water-line.

Calm, precise instructions were now coming from the rear cockpit over the intercom: 'Start losing height at 300 feet per minute, speed 200 knots and follow the fjord'. I eased forward on the stick, closed my following aircraft in a little, felt the speed building up, 170 knots, 190 knots, 200 knots, and held it at that. No time for any feelings now other than intense concentration that was making me sweat a little. Suddenly, ahead of us was Bergen, looking quiet and peaceful in the sparkling, early morning sunlight. To port were three large fuel storage tanks and ahead and to starboard ships, but merchant ships only — no cruiser. There was no sign of activity of any sort, no enemy fighters and no AA fire.

We were almost down to 8000 feet when we spotted her, a long, thin, grey shape lying alongside a jetty. I pulled away to port in order to make a great sweep up to the mountains and over the town of Bergen itself and so attack out of the rising sun.

Now I was heading back towards the German cruiser and concentrating hard to get my Skua and those following me into the correct position for starting our dive. This position was, in my opinion, of the utmost importance. Dive-bombing is a most accurate, perhaps the most accurate, method of delivering a bomb onto a selected target, and the angle of dive determines the accuracy of the attack: too steep and the dive tends to get even steeper and out of control; too shallow and the target tends to disappear under one and accuracy is lost. But start the dive in just the right position so that you are going down at 65°, then in a good dive-bomber like the Skua with its large flaps accurate bombing becomes almost easy.

Having reached a suitable position, I did a 90° turn to port, eased back on the stick, flaps down, further back on the stick, a half stall turn to starboard and then I was in a well-controlled dive with the cruiser held steady in my sights. I was losing height and down to 6000 feet with the target still held steady in my sights when to my astonishment ahead of me in the dive I saw a Skua release its bomb and go racing away at water level. I later found out that this was the last aircraft of 803 Squadron so, quite fortuitously, we were going to carry out our planned continuous

raid with all 16 aircraft!

I was attacking the ship from bow to stern and the only resistance being offered was coming from a light Bofors type AA gun on the fo'c'sle which kept firing throughout the engagement; tracer bullets were gliding past on either side. My dive was still firm and controlled with the ship held steady in my sights and I could see water and oil gushing out of her below the waterline and guessed that she had already been damaged. Down to 3500 feet now and beginning to watch my height; mustn't lose accuracy by releasing too high and mustn't release too low and risk blowing myself up. 3000 feet, 2500, 2000, and at 1800 I pressed the release button on the stick and let my bombs go, turning violently away to starboard and then down to water level when well clear.

As we raced low down the fjord at full throttle Lieutenant Commander Hare was telling me that he reckoned we had had a near miss on the ship's starboard bow when he suddenly said 'MTB travelling fast ahead of us', and there was a motor torpedo boat, at full speed with decks crowded with servicemen. I turned towards her and as we got near gave a long burst with my front guns and saw men jumping off and into the water. We were being fired on now by AA batteries in the woods on the steep side of the fjord and in this mad dash we were making I was tempted to have a go at them too. Sensibly, I resisted this rash impulse and continued to climb to 5000 feet over our rendezvous. There I saw the glad sight of Bill Lucy with all his squadron but one, and I was soon joined by mine. Circling, waiting for Bill's straggler, was bad for my nerves as the excitement of the attack and getaway began to wear off. As I sat there jittery in my cockpit imagining hordes of MellOs arriving at any moment I was vastly relieved to see a single-engined monoplane approaching; Bill's missing Skua. We learnt later that this aircraft had dived with 803 Squadron but had had a hang-up and couldn't release its bombs. The pilot, determined not to jettison them, had laboriously climbed back to 8000 feet, circled over Bergen again, and carried out a lone attack after we had all gone. This time the AA gun on the fo'c'sle was no longer firing.

Sixteen aircraft into the attack and sixteen out! It seemed too good to be true: and we had certainly damaged that ship, perhaps we had even sunk her. We were now on course for home and had been airborne for some two and a half hours with

the best part of another two hours flying ahead of us. It would be touch and go, and should a head wind get up it seemed extremely likely that some of us at least would get very wet feet. After ten minutes on our homeward course — disaster! The outer aircraft on my starboard side suddenly went into a vertical dive and hit the sea under full power; all that remained was a large circle of disturbed water and a few pieces of wreckage. There was nothing that could possibly be done save to continue on our long flight home. It was never possible to discover what had happened but it seemed likely that either the aircraft had been hit and succumbed to elevator control failure or the pilot had been wounded, held out so far, and then suddenly collapsed.

There was seven-tenths cloud now and moderate visibility as we steadily flew on at our most economical speed. By 0900 I had been airborne for 3 hrs 45 mins, which meant 35 minutes of our official endurance left, but still no sight of ship or land. I was now frequently looking at my watch and anxiously watching my fuel gauges, and I am sure everybody else was doing the same. It would be ironic if we all ended up in the drink, after such a successful attack. The time was now 0935 and I had been airborne for our official endurance of 4 hrs and 20 mins when to my utmost relief my observer said quietly over the intercom: 'Stronsay fine on our starboard bow'. Stronsay was the most easterly of the Orkney Islands and we were almost home.

I landed at 0945 having been in the air for four and a half hours. Some of the aircraft clocked up five minutes longer, depending on the order in which they had taken off and landed. Some marvellous stories ran round the squadron for days afterwards among the ground crews — 'He didn't have enough petrol in his tanks to cover a penny'; 'As he taxied in towards me his engine cut dead, his tanks were completely dry'; 'His engine cut out as he touched down' — a certain amount of exaggeration no doubt, but it was assuredly true that we had mighty little to spare.

There was great excitement, congratulations and euphoria whilst we were being debriefed before going off to breakfast. General opinion among the naval pilots and observers was that our target had been a Köln class cruiser and we were all certain that she had been badly damaged, perhaps even sunk. This was confirmed later by a report from RAF reconnaissance flights and photographs which showed that the ship was sunk alongside the jetty. Later, intelligence from Norway established that she was in

fact the cruiser *Königsberg*. Bill Lucy's rash, mad plan had worked and for the loss of only one aircraft, which seemed a small price to pay; and so I suppose it was except to those directly connected: sorrowing mums and dads, brothers and sisters, fiancées perhaps and girl friends. They had received a blow that for some might last a lifetime but which we, distressed as we were at the loss of good friends, had to put as soon as possible from our minds, or accept as the fortunes of war in the full knowledge that it might be anybody's turn next. Grieving over losses is bad for morale and efficiency and from now on our losses were to mount rapidly: it was not long before the only surviving officer of my squadron was myself.

The sinking of the *Königsberg* was a historic event, demonstrating for the first time the effectiveness of the dive-bomber against major warships. This was a lesson that was not lost upon the Japanese and American Navies as was demonstrated time after time in those terrific battles that were to take place later in the war of the Pacific. Inexplicably, this lesson was ignored by our Admiralty, or as a well-known author on naval affairs so succinctly put it to me, was greeted with 'roars of indifference', and it was not long before the Skua was phased out of operational flying because of its poor performance as a fighter. A poor fighter it may have been but in my opinion it was a great dive-bomber and used properly in surprise attacks or with adequate fighter cover it could have played a more significant role in the early war years. As it was the Blackburn Skua had its finest hour in the attack on the *Königsberg* and so has its place in naval aviation history.

Lieutenant W Lucy RN and I were awarded the DSO for this attack and our two observers the DSC. Poor Bill was not to learn of his award for a short time later he was shot down and killed while attacking a Heinkel. I had lost a very great friend and the Fleet Air Arm a very fine officer and pilot.

I quote below the citation in the *London Gazette* dated Tuesday, 7th May, 1940 that Bill was never to see.

‘The King has been graciously pleased to give orders for the following appointments to the Distinguished Service Order for daring and resource in the conduct of hazardous and successful operations by the Fleet Air Arm against the enemy, especially on the coast of Norway:-

Captain Richard Thomas Partridge, Royal Marines
Lieutenant William Paulet Lucy, Royal Navy.'